

# Laura Bush Visits Tirana Women's Wellness Center

## First Lady Learns About the Many Innovative Women's Health Services Implemented by AIHA's Tirana/Providence Partners

Tirana, Albania, June 10, 2007 — US First Lady Laura Bush today visited Queen Geraldine Obstetrics and Gynecological Hospital, touring the Women's Wellness Center established through the efforts of AIHA's Tirana/Providence partnership.

The Tirana/Providence partnership linked Queen Geraldine Obstetrics and Gynecological Hospital — then called Tirana Maternity Hospital No. 1— with the Women and Infants Hospital of Rhode Island in Providence. The goal of the partnership was to establish an ambulatory clinic where Albanian women of all ages could have access to comprehensive, patient-centered health services and educational programs. That goal was achieved in September 2000 when the Tirana Women's Wellness Center (WWC) opened its doors.

From the very onset of the partnership, Halim Kosova, director of Queen Geraldine Hospital, was eager improve the quality and scope of healthcare services available at the facility, recalls lead US partner David E. Gagnon, president of the National Perinatal Information Center in Providence.

"Halim and his staff wanted to learn everything they could about how we approached maternal and child care in the United States," Gagnon says. "They worked with us to develop new programs based on what they found useful here, integrating these with some really great programs that were already in operation at the hospital," he explains.

Through the partnership, the Tirana WWC has emerged as a pioneer in efforts to improve women's healthcare in Albania. The center receives more than 12,000 patient visits each year, in part because of the broad range of clinical services it provides. Patients have access to family planning, reproductive health, perinatal care, and cancer screening services, as well as primary care and mental health screening and counseling. It also offers an



US First lady Laura Bush and Dr. Liri Berisha, wife of Albania's Prime Minister (left), give some special attention to infants in the Angel's Cradle Nursery at Queen Geraldine Hospital. The nursery is home to babies who have been abandoned and has a special place in the hearts of the Providence team, who collaborated with their Tirana partners and volunteers from the nonprofit Organization for the Support of Albania's Abandoned Babies (OSAAB) to ensure these infants are well cared for and receive the kindness and affection they need.

extensive array of education and outreach programs covering topics such as prenatal care, child birth preparation, newborn care, breast feeding, breast health, sexually transmitted infections, menopause, and healthy lifestyles.

In 2002, partners launched a cervical cancer screening program and established Albania's first cytology/pathology laboratory, so that slides could be read onsite. Lauding the WWC's work, USAID-Albania Population, Health, and Nutrition Officer Pamela Wyville-Staples said the center set "the gold standard in fighting cervical cancer and is a voice for improved policy on women's health in Albania."

In fact, the Tirana WWC model has proven so effective, the Albanian Ministry of Health chose to replicate it at Tirana's other maternity hospital. Staff have shared the center's protocols with four Tirana polyclinics and provided training on women's health issues for care providers



During her visit to the Tirana Women's Wellness Center, Mrs. Bush participated in a roundtable discussion that focused on the leadership role women can play in Albania, the United States, and around the globe, as well as the importance of standing up for the rights of women and children.

at Lezha Town Health Center in Lezha, Albania. They also worked with AIHA and Doctors of the World to establish two WWCs in the Kosovar towns of Gjilan and Prizren.

During her visit, Mrs. Bush learned of these accomplishments and got a first-hand look at the many innovative programs the partners have implemented at the Tirana WWC, including prenatal education classes.

The importance of patient education and outreach emerged early on when partners first started conducting needs assessments and focus groups to help direct their work. As it turned out, the women were eager to have their voices heard. "Just asking these women what their basic concerns were opened the floodgates because they had never been given a voice before," says Carol Opiekun, associate vice president for patient care services at Women and Infants Hospital.

"We found that women were often traumatized by labor and birth because they had absolutely no idea what to expect," explains Maureen Pearlman, director of health education and community outreach at Women and Infants Hospital. "We worked aggressively to change the notion that ignorance is bliss by organizing health fairs and other educational activities, including group classes," she says.

Dr. Kosova agrees that pregnant women in Albania are not always aware of how crucial good prenatal care is to the welfare of their unborn baby and themselves. "Too often,

women don't think of their health until they are already having problems. Our experience has shown that this lack of knowledge cost lives," he says, noting that the prenatal classes help prevent the tragedies that can stem from being uninformed. Because of his strong belief in the power of knowledge, Kosova created a patient education center where new or expectant mothers can learn how to take better care of themselves, as well as their infants and families.

Throughout the course of the partnership, nurses, midwives, and social workers from Tirana received training in patient education from their US counterparts, including Opiekun and Pearlman. They also began providing training and support to the Tirana-based nonprofit, Organization for the Support of Albania's Abandoned Babies (OSAAB), which established the Angel's Cradle Nursery — another stop on Mrs. Bush's tour of the hospital.

The collaboration didn't stop when the partnership officially "graduated" from US government support in 2004. As a result of the relationships forged, OSAAB provided funding for Providence partners to travel to Albania four times during the past year to conduct training courses for WWC and hospital staff, as well as volunteers who work at the nursery. This commitment on both sides has led to marked improvements in the care and support that expectant and new parents receive at the hospital.

"When we started working with our Tirana partners, there was a real stigma attached to infants who were abandoned. The feeling among society at large, some healthcare workers included, was if the mothers didn't care about these babies, why should they?" Gagnon recalls.

Working closely with OSAAB, partners have launched a community-based program designed to educate women about pregnancy, the birthing process, and child care, as well as the realities of motherhood. Hopefully, Pearlman says, the knowledge and skills passed on through this program will result in healthier, happier families and fewer abandoned babies.

The First Lady's visit highlighted the fact that members of the Tirana/Providence partnership have much to be proud of. Their ongoing success highlights the fact that sustained relationships lead to sustained development.

*White House photos by Shealah Craighead.*